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The Leadership Triad: Identity, Integrity, Authenticity

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The purpose of this qualitative intrinsic case study was to analyze how the inner lives of fifteen educational leaders impacted their leadership practice. The common experience of the Courage To Lead (CTL) program defined the case. This case study was bound by place as the cohort of educational leaders involved in this study were all from the Seattle area in Washington State and experienced the CTL program in 2002-2004 at the same venue. The study is bounded by time in that the analysis of the participants was from the beginning of their CTL experience in November, 2002 until January, 2007.

This research was framed by the following central question: How did the inner life impact the leadership practice of a group of educational leaders who experienced the Courage To Lead program? The following nine subquestions were used: How did these leaders perceive that their leadership practice was affected by: 1. Use of self examination? 2. The clarity of their own personal identity? 3. Personal authenticity? 4. Bringing heart to their work? 5. Integrity of their inner life to their leadership? 6. Inner life and relationships? 7. Inner life and the exhibition of courage? 8. Inner life and the ability to build community in their organizations? 9. Inner life in the current educational context?

Thematic coding analyzed three primary sources of data: individual interviews, categorical aggregation of those interview transcriptions based on the subquestions, and a focus group discussion.

Three key issues surfaced from the analysis and triangulation of the data. They are: 1. The inner life of these leaders was critical to their living and leadership revealing itself in a Triad of the Self: Identity-Integrity-Authenticity. 2. Looking inward was not the only direction for whole living and leading. The Identity-Integrity-Authenticity triad caused these leaders to recognize that their outer living reflected and affected the quality and ongoing development of their inner work. 3. The Courage To Lead program recognizes this individual inner journey and the communal outer journey and by design provides a unique environment for enhancing this inner-outer pilgrimage. In CTL the participants travel "alone together."

Keywords: Hartsoch PLC Professional Learning Community

The Identity that the study's participants valued and struggled to clearly define surfaced as the "I am" of the deepest sort – as Rachel called it, "my who." But this who was more than even Descartes' famous cogito, "I think; therefore, I am." This sense of Identity went deeper than thought, logic, reason, intellect or values/belief systems for most of these participants and certainly so for some. It was akin to Greenleaf's (1977) intuition of the servant leader. It seemed to fall into what some scholars and writers have called the Real Self (Merton, 1967) or the self-no self (Thompson, 2000). This Identity as articulated by these participants resonated with the intersection of Jung's individual self with the collective unconscious Self considered by Jung to be God.

Although these participants struggled to articulate their internal and uniquely personal Identity, it was expressed within the framework of a variety of faith structures: some were nonreligious, some were Buddhist or Hindu in their beliefs, some were American Christian evangelical, and some were Roman Catholic. The Identity of these participants did not seem to be bound in the confines of religious structures. It seemed to exist individually transcending creedal differences. As the poet and founder of the mystical Islamic Sufi sect, Rumi, suggests, "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there." These participants were of significantly different religious

or philosophic ilk yet seemed to grasp Rumi's concept in explaining their Identity and also as evidenced in the uncommon community they experienced in the Courage To Lead program that bound the case.

The second part of this leadership triad of the self was how this Identity began to surface in these participants' lives and was best described as Integrity. This word seemed to aptly define that juncture where these participants chose or willed or as Alan stated, "bridged" their Identity to their world. Integrity, as such, was more than simple honesty for these participants. It was a conscious yet driving force for bringing their Identity to their world, a will to beingness or wholeness or congruence of their inner world with their outer world.

Finally, this triad of the Self is completed by the Authenticity of these participants' lives and their specific behaviors and attributes that make their Identity real in their world. It is here in Authenticity that a pantheon of potentially good attributes and behaviors surfaced: realness, awareness, presence, uncommon listening, connection, balancing paradox, servanthood, leading and learning as bi-directional, courage and taking a stand in the face of injustice, and uncommon relationships and community. It was also here in Authentic living that the inner recognition of the shadows and limitations of their Identity resulted in the balance, health, honesty, and humility that this inner recognition brought. The following Figure 1 is a simple – overly simple as will always be the case when one tries to distill the complexity of a human being into a diagram – visual presentation of the Identity-Integrity-Authenticity triad as explained in the previous paragraphs. It is offered here to augment the verbal explanation already presented.

See Figure 1

But what can be said about the level of actualization by these participants in realizing this triad of the Self? Some seemed to be further along than others or were, as alluded to earlier, at least more capable articulators of their own triad. Tom openly admitted having resisted self examination and absolutely refusing to reveal his Identity. He knew this and lived and led successfully for a number of years. His Identity was absent yet his Integrity and Authenticity seemed to be intact. By his own admission he realized that he could in fact live and lead from an Identity that was not his own, a false self. Why change his outer world drastically to accommodate a truer Self when most lauded the Authenticity of his existing leadership? It was an intriguing question. It prompted the understanding that one might live and lead from a false Identity and that one might even live and lead from a true Identity but fail in willing it into the world with courageous Integrity. But either dynamic requires a toll be paid in health, spiritual and otherwise, and in realizing true Authenticity. Both of these observations about missing elements in the Triad of the Self suggested, as discussed in the focus group, an almost mathematical relationship of Identity + Integrity = Authenticity. As expected and demanded by the Triad of the Self, this discussion must turn outward.

The Outer Work

In examining this case, it became clear that these participants recognized that their Identity-Integrity-Authenticity triad was affected and in some ways defined by their interaction with their world. In other words, there was an outward direction to their journey as well as the critical inward journey. This too has been articulated by various thinkers such as Thomas Merton (1967) and others previously mentioned but this study has served to empirically validate this reality within this case study. These participants recognized firsthand that their inner work was only as valid and indeed reflected their outer work evidenced in behaviors, attributes and relationships. And that as their inner life deepened, so did the depth of their capacity for more meaningful relationships and community in their living and leading, therefore, expanding their outer life.

So, did the lives and leadership of these participants exceed what might be called common Authenticity? Not always and that was by their own admission and through their own stories. What can be concluded here? Although these participants who valued and engaged the inner life were by their own description flawed individuals, there was humility in recognition of this and an appreciation for deepening the discovery of the real Self and how it could better realize Authenticity.

This relationship between the inner and outer might be visualized by a comparison to a tree, the tree of wholeness in living or leadership perhaps. As a tree's root system deepens, expands, and widens over time so does the

limb system above the ground. Our Identity is like the root system and as it deepens into the “ground of all being” and discovers increasing connection and oneness there, it also grows upward and outward through the trunk, our Integrity, creating in direct proportion a limb system just as wide, expansive, embracing and discerning as the root system. This limb system is analogous to the outward behaviors of Authenticity - courage, listening, connection, and meaningful relationships. As our root system reaches into the darkness of the deep, so do the branches of our limbs open and expand into the light - like the mighty oaks of the South.

Not to overextend our metaphor, from botany we know that trees exchange nutrients absorbed from the underground through the root system which are channeled upward through the xylem in the trunk and in similar fashion, the products of the photosynthetic process carried on in the limb system are channeled to the roots through the phloem of the trunk. The metaphorical tree of wholeness of Self grows and diminishes as one is willing or not willing to absorb the nutrients discovered deep in the darkness of inner work and as one is willing to bring those nutrients into the light of living and relationships where they can be transformed into products that in turn feed our Identity at its deepest definition. Both are required – the mining of the depths within in the dark and the exchanges outside found in the light. What many seem to discover is a mystery where the Dark and the Light can complement one another.

This analogy might border on the poetic but so must the language of understanding this inner-outer relationship. Scholars, philosophers and mystics have always turned to poetry and metaphor to articulate this inner-outer relationship. Greenleaf (1977) turned to Robert Frost to articulate this dynamic for discussing the foundation of servant leadership. Plato used an allegory about a cave to illustrate the character of the kind of leader needed for his ideal republic. This study and this tree analogy accept this company.

Another visual representation for this inner-outer dynamic can best be understood with drawings. As depicted below in Figure 2, the horizontal line represents the boundary between one’s inner Identity and their outer Authenticity. For most of us our Identity begins relatively shallow and often narrow but as we mature and realize something bigger than ourselves we begin to deepen and perhaps even connect with the Ultimate Reality or ground of being within. We may not completely comprehend such oneness or Ultimate Reality. And our Authenticity will often reflect the shallow and narrow nature of our Identity.

Fortunately, we can change this dynamic as we choose to deepen, broaden and expand our Identity with inner work as shown by the triangles below the horizontal line. In so doing, the triangles defining our Authenticity above the horizontal line reflect our expanding inner life with an increasing capacity for meaningful and uncommon relationships and community out in the world as well as a broadening perspective.

The final implication of this inner-outer dynamic is perhaps the most intriguing and brings to mind Kohlberg’s Stage Six of Moral Development or Merton’s (1961) definition of a saint or the Buddhist’s definition of enlightenment. If one is willing to do the often frightening, unsettling pilgrimage deep within, one can experience what can only be described mystically as absolute immersion in the ground of being so that Thompson’s (2000) self-no self or Merton’s (1967) Real Self is revealed. The triangles below the horizontal line defining our Identity extend out and broaden to such a degree that they approach the line separating our inner from our outer. At the same time, the triangles defining our Authenticity above the horizontal line expand and widen and deepen into the world such that they too approach the horizontal line separating our outer from our inner and we see an individual with no separation between their inner Identity and their outer Authenticity – they “flatline” as it were into an uncommon congruence and Integrity.

See Figure 2

As Merton said about saints in his Christian context, “It was because the saints were absorbed in God that they were truly capable of seeing and appreciating created things and it was because they loved Him alone that they alone loved everybody” (1961, p. 23). Perhaps we have all caught glimpses of such individuals and they certainly exist across all wisdom traditions. Greenleaf (1977) and Burns (1978) would both recommend Gandhi as an example approaching this distinction and Palmer has provided a similar visual using the Mobius Strip to illustrate a person

whose inner and outer domains flow beautifully and seamlessly into each other (2004, pp. 45-49). These congruent individuals become uncommon leaders with an uncommon courage in the face of daunting odds.

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Figure 1
Identity-Integrity-Authenticity Triad

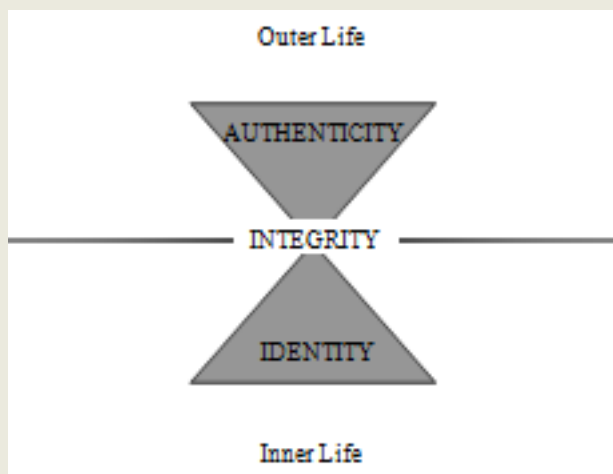
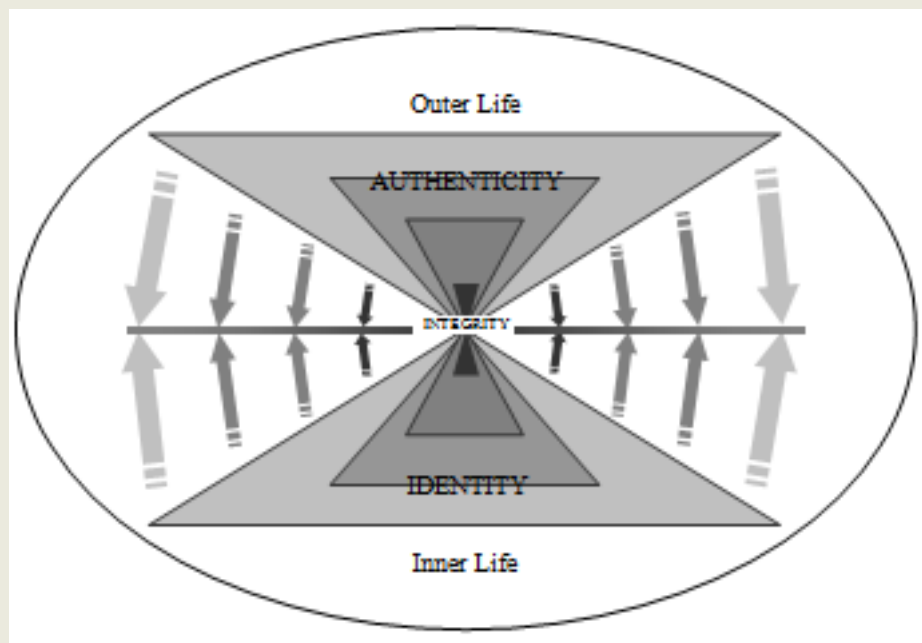


Figure 2

The Inner-Outer Flow



David Henderson, Ed.D., grew up in Memphis, TN and was a high school chemistry and biology teacher after completing a B.A. in science education at Harding University where he later completed an M.Ed. in English education. He studied theology and served as a minister for a time. He worked in the software industry in Dallas, TX from 1981-1993 as a technical writer, software developer, product manager, and eventual manager of a software research and development team. In 1993 he left Dallas for Yaak, MT (the very northwest corner of the state) where he taught 5th-8th grades in the last one room school in Montana that still met in its original log cabin. From 1993-2007 in Montana he was a public school educator and high school principal, completed his doctorate and taught at The University of Montana in Missoula, and co-founded Montana Courage To Teach. Currently he lives in Oklahoma where he teaches graduate courses in educational leadership at Southwestern Oklahoma State University and continues facilitating Courage To Teach, Courage To Lead and Circles of Trust retreats. He continues to study and research the intersection of the inner life of leaders with their practice of leadership grounded in a heart striving for integrity and authenticity.

